



The GOP's governing class

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September 16, 2022

Washington is the focus of the political competition this year, with both parties vying for control of a narrowly divided Congress two years ahead of the next race for the White House. But it is the governors' mansions where much of the action is, including the Republicans' most compelling attempts to provide a rival model of governance to that offered by the administration of President Joe Biden.

In the 50 states, there are 28 Republican governors and 22 Democratic chief executives. Thirty-six of these governorships are up for election in November, with a partisan breakdown of 20 Republican-held seats to 16 occupied by Democrats. Many in the former group are consciously trying to provide a contrast with Biden and a handful of them could wind up seeking the presidency themselves. The number of Democrats positioning themselves as emergency understudies for Biden should he not seek reelection is much smaller.

As Biden celebrated "historic progress pulling our economy out of the worst crisis in 100 years" over the summer, the Republican Governors Association was quick to shoot back that 16 of the 20 states with the lowest unemployment rates were led by GOP governors, while eight of the 10 states with the highest unemployment had Democratic governors, including Biden's Delaware. Three times as many Republican-led states had unemployment rates below the national average as states holding that distinction with Democratic governors.

"Sky-high prices and still high inflation are crippling American families. While Republican governors work to provide relief, Joe Biden and Washington Democrats push through reckless tax and spend policies and continue with their lies and empty promises," RGA communications director Jesse Hunt said in a statement. "As Democrat governors double down on these failed policies, it comes as no surprise that red states have stronger economies."

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds led 21 other Republican governors in opposition to Biden's student loan debt forgiveness plan. "As governors, we support making higher education more affordable and accessible for students in our states, but we fundamentally oppose your plan to force American taxpayers to pay off the student loan debt of an elite few — a plan that is estimated to cost the American taxpayer more than \$2,000 each or \$600 billion total, a price the people of our states cannot afford," they wrote in an RGA-distributed letter. "Only 16-17 percent of Americans have federal student loan debt, and yet, your plan will require their debts be redistributed and paid by the vast majority of taxpayers."

When the Biden White House sought to position itself as the lead defender of school reopening as the pandemic wound down — press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre described it as "the work of

this president and that was the work of Democrats in spite of Republicans not voting for the American Rescue Plan,” the nearly \$2 trillion spending bill that helped fuel record inflation — GOP governors made the case that they were on the cutting edge.

“By and large, Republican states really managed the pandemic better than some of these Democrat-led states because we listened to the individuals, we listened to businesses, we listened to families and kids and parents that were struggling through school and some of that remote learning and stuff,” New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu said at an RGA education presentation. “It was a quick stopgap to be sure, but we knew we had to get those schools open.”

“We’ve focused during the entire pandemic on making sure we balance lives and livelihoods,” Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey said at the event. “The key with COVID recovery was about transparency, being very upfront with what the situation was,” Sununu concurred. Oklahoma Gov. Kenny Sitt agreed, saying, “ COVID really shined a spotlight on parents’ rights and what was being taught in our school system.”

That’s what led to the victory of one of the most recently elected Republican governors, Glenn Youngkin of Virginia. Running in a state with two Democratic senators that Biden carried by 10 points, where a Republican governor hadn’t been elected since 2009, down in the polls as the early voting commenced, Youngkin ran successfully on the idea of parental control of education as his opponent embraced the teachers unions and bureaucracy.

Subsequent research indicated that while critical race theory and other liberal educational fads generated enthusiasm among the Republican base, it was parental involvement in the curriculum more broadly that moved independents’ votes. “At the end of the day, parents became the leaders of this movement,” Youngkin said at the RGA discussion. “We listened to parents, and we’re going to include parents in our decision-making on a go-forward basis and give them a voice.”

"Much of the 2022 midterm attention has been directed at the balance of power in Congress, but one could argue that the battles for the various governors' mansions around the country are just as vital," Republican strategist Ford O’Connell said. “Election watchers are rightly focused on the gubernatorial battles in Nevada, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia.”

Tax and budget policy expert Chris Edwards authors the Cato Institute's biennial fiscal report card for the nation’s governors. “There is a deep bench of GOP governors who appear to be solid fiscal conservatives, such as the governors of Arizona, Arkansas, Iowa, South Dakota, Florida, Texas, Idaho, Nebraska, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, etc.,” he said. Edwards wouldn’t say who won in the newest (as yet unreleased) edition, but he noted New Hampshire’s Sununu, the last top performer, “has continued to perform very well — cutting taxes and restraining spending. And he's popular in public polling.”

Republican governors have their commonalities. “Democrats spend more, Republicans don’t,” said a GOP campaign operative involved in multiple gubernatorial races. “Democrats tax more, Republicans don’t.”

But the incumbent Republican governors can be broken down into three broad groups.

The Combatants

These are the governors who not only are the more combative with Democrats and left-wing power centers inside their own states, though in many cases their homes are conservative enough

that there isn't meaningful opposition. They have also been the first to push back against the Biden administration on economics, the environment, energy policy, healthcare, and on various fronts of the culture war.

The willingness of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee, South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, Arizona's Ducey, Iowa's Reynolds, and Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp to mix it up with Biden and Democrats nationally puts them in presidential or vice presidential consideration. They will at a minimum be on vice presidential short lists in about a year's time. Perhaps one or more will find themselves in the position to compile such a list.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis leads this group. Many Republican insiders the *Washington Examiner* spoke to put him in a category by himself. The 44-year-old would vault to early front-runner status for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination if former President Donald Trump retired tomorrow.

Either way, DeSantis is widely seen as marrying Trump's pugilism and political instincts — “Crooked Hillary,” “Low Energy Jeb,” and belatedly “Sleepy Joe” sum up an opponent's signature weakness as well as reams of professionally gathered opposition research — with the kind of sharp message discipline that persistently eluded the 45th president. And conservatives tend to group DeSantis with Trump in terms of understanding the stakes.

“The Left is playing for keeps,” DeSantis told the latest National Conservatism Conference in Miami. “This is not an easy fight because they have so much support across the commanding heights of society. It requires that, yes, we use common sense and, yes, we understand the issues and [are] correct on those.”

“But more and more, it requires that you do so by demonstrating courage under fire because if you stand up for what's right, you are going to get attacked by the corporate press,” he continued. “You may get censored by Big Tech. You will get smeared by the opposition. If you're not willing to take the arrows, you're not going to get anything done. You've got to be willing to stand, and you've got to be willing to fight.”

DeSantis has taken on Walt Disney, the abortion rights lobby, LGBT activists, and the public health bureaucracy. He has done so not from the safest red state but in a traditional battleground where his 2018 margin of victory — yes, he was first elected statewide in a Democratic wave election year — was 0.4 percentage points.

In a lengthy presentation on DeSantis's record, a spokesman tied together low 2.7% unemployment, sizable immigration to Florida in addition to high visitation, high educational attainment at a time when experts are lamenting a year or more of lost learning, and economic growth under the banner of the state's COVID-19 response.

“When others locked people down, Florida lifted people up,” he said. “Florida followed data and science but refused to make policy decisions based on fear. Florida protected jobs, businesses, families and education, and freedom.”

Unaffiliated Republicans told the *Washington Examiner* much the same thing. “The governor's race in Florida may be the most important midterm race in the country because of its long-term

implications,” O’Connell said. “Should Gov. DeSantis prevail, it sends a message to everyone that freedom, choice, and safety are what most Americans crave regardless of party.”

Abbott in Texas has found himself at ground zero of the border crisis largely of Biden’s making. He has responded by constructing a state-funded border wall, a continuation of Trump’s signature campaign pledge at the federal level. His busing of immigrants to blue cities and to Vice President Kamala Harris’s doorstep has been denounced by the White House — Jean-Pierre has accused him of using the undocumented as political “pawns” — but has sent the message as these would-be sanctuary jurisdictions swiftly declare a state of emergency.

DeSantis for his part has sent the Florida National Guard to the southwestern border to help and has dispatched immigrants to Martha’s Vineyard, an affluent liberal playground. Ducey has sent busloads to Washington, D.C.

The Texas governor has also signed some of the strongest antiabortion measures in the country, even before the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. He approved a “trigger law” if *Roe* fell. Abbott also signed the “heartbeat bill” banning abortions after six weeks, enforced civilly to evade the court’s pre-*Dobbs* strictures.

Kemp, as with Abbott and DeSantis, led the way on reopening after COVID-19 lockdowns. Despite standing up to Trump in the aftermath of the 2020 election, refusing to attribute Biden’s narrow win to massive voter fraud, his support for voter integrity laws made him a national Democratic target. Kemp’s voting laws were likened to Jim Crow by the president.

That has become illustrative of Kemp’s unique position. He has been attacked for voter suppression since his first election in 2018, when he was the incumbent secretary of state. He has been maligned for not signing up for “stop the steal.”

“He’s beaten Trump,” said a GOP operative, referring to Kemp’s easy primary win over Trump-endorsed former Sen. David Perdue (R-GA). “This will be the second time he’s beaten Stacey Abrams. Brian Kemp is someone who’s navigated the political environment extremely well.”

All of them have benefited from a climate of tax-cutting. “The dollar value of recent state tax cuts is the largest in at least four decades, prompted by large, often huge, budget surpluses in most states,” Edwards said. “More than 20 states have cut individual or corporate income tax rates the past few years.”

The Blue State Bulwarks

Some of the nation’s bluest states have repeatedly elected Republican governors. Five of the six Massachusetts governors since Michael Dukakis left office in 1991 have been Republicans. Every New England state has had at least one GOP chief executive since the turn of the century.

These governors tend not to be very conservative by national standards. They usually support legal abortion. They frequently flinch from culture war issues and are at best lukewarm supporters of Republican presidents and presidential candidates — if at all under Trump.

But they are some of the best-loved governors in the country. When Morning Consult last did its top 10 most popular governors feature, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, Vermont Gov. Phil Scott, and New Hampshire’s Sununu rounded out the top five. In April, Baker, Scott, and Hogan were the three most popular governors, in that order, all with job

approval ratings among registered voters in excess of 70%. Sununu was sixth, with 63% approval. The Granite State isn't blue, but the others are reliably so.

For reference, that's above Biden's job approval rating nationally even after a modest rebound. Their numbers exceed Biden's approval in all of those states, even after the president regained his popularity in them.

Competent technocrats all, these Republican governors hold the line on taxes, spending, and crime in highly liberal jurisdictions. They are often major obstacles to the corruption that can occur in one-party states and are more conservative than some of their predecessors. Hogan, for example, wrote in Ronald Reagan for president rather than Nelson Rockefeller.

It is nevertheless difficult to imagine any of them seriously running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024 or beyond, though Hogan would like to try. The Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision will likely further complicate this by making it even more challenging for an anti-abortion Republican — think former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who is also contemplating another presidential bid — to get elected governor of a blue state.

These Republican governors play an important role, but their national leadership potential inside the party is limited. They often decline even to mount home-state Senate campaigns, as Sununu did earlier this year.

The Institutionalists

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb — these leaders are considered, fairly or not, successful establishment Republicans. Those who define these ranks more exclusively by a GOP governor's relationship with Trump may consider Ducey or Kemp miscategorized.

Then again, Trump endorsed DeWine, whose margin could help Senate candidate J.D. Vance across the finish line in November, for reelection by calling him an “outstanding person” who “quietly, but professionally and patriotically, goes about doing his job, and really well.”

The *Atlantic* described DeWine as “the ultimate Republican pragmatist, going as far right as necessary — but no further — to win and stay in office.” Most of them are centrists only in the sense that they are more conservative than the blue-staters and less so than the fighters. And any combatant could find themselves dropped into this category by picking too few fights for the base, as Noem risked with her veto of the transgender athletics bill in her state.

“There are two things that I think about when it comes to GOP governors,” Republican strategist John Feehery said. “First, how did they handle COVID? DeSantis, Kemp, Reynolds, Noem, and to a lesser extent Abbott all did a great job on COVID-19. Others, like Hogan, Baker, DeWine, the guy from Indiana? Not so much.”

“Second, how are they dealing with Trump? Are they slavishly devoted to him, relatively neutral, or openly antagonistic?” Feehery continued. “I think the politically strongest place is relatively neutral. I would put DeSantis and Reynolds in that camp.”

Federalism and fiscal conservatism help. “Data from the IRS clearly show that Americans are moving from high-tax to low-tax states,” Cato's Edwards said. “For example, as widely known,

they are moving out of New York and California and into Florida and Texas. But people are also moving into colder places that have very low taxes, including New Hampshire and South Dakota.”

“Interstate tax competition has been strengthened by the remote work trend, which has created more locational flexibility,” he added. “Furthermore, the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act magnified tax differences between the states by capping the federal deduction for state and local taxes.”

For years, gubernatorial experience was seen as a boon to presidential aspirations in both parties. But no governor has been president since George W. Bush left office after two terms in 2009. After his brother Jeb dropped out of the race following a poor performance in the South Carolina primary, none of the top-tier 2016 Republicans were current or former governors.

Trump was able to use his executive experience in business as a proxy for that kind of leadership when arguing he was more qualified than the senators who were his leading primary opponents.

Now Republicans could be looking for a different kind of executive leadership and have a deep roster from which to find it.

“Ultimately, somebody is going to have to beat Trump if they want to win the nomination,” Feehery said. “Trump mismanaged COVID. That’s his Achilles' heel.”